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Ruybal Hired to Look Out for Armed Services Veterans at EIU

Feb-24-2011

For an armed services veteran, life on a traditional university campus can be a bit unsettling.

"It's very foreign to us," said Michael Ruybal, newly hired veterans coordinator at Eastern Illinois University. "We've become accustomed to a very structured life style, so it can be hard to adjust, hard to adapt."

The 36-year-old speaks from experience. Following 13 years of active duty in the U.S. Army -- years that took him to such far-away places as Iraq, Afghanistan, Kuwait and Macedonia -- Ruybal was injured in the line of duty and took medical retirement. For him, the next step was an easy decision to make.

"It was a no brainer. . . I was going to get my degree," he said.

He attended New Mexico State University where he studied and received his bachelor's of fine arts in graphic arts and illustration. Upon graduation, he was offered -- and accepted -- a full-time position as resident director of student family housing.

For two years, Ruybal frequently browsed the website HigherEdJobs.com, helping his students in their search for internships. But then a Fall 2010 listing from a university in Illinois caught his interest on a more personal level.

Eastern Illinois University was seeking an individual to serve as "coordinator of veterans and military personnel student services."

"It was the first job posting of its kind I had seen in two years," Ruybal said. "Those type of positions don't come open very often. Those who have them tend to hold them for a long time."

Ruybal applied and was hired; he began his new job on the morning of Jan. 18. By noon of that day, he was already asking for time to speak with Dan Nadler, vice president for student affairs, to discuss specific ideas on not only how to enhance campus life for current student veterans, but how to recruit others into attending EIU.

"I'm aware of 252 veterans currently attending Eastern," Ruybal said. "My goal is to increase that number to between 500 and 800."

"From the very first moment of his arrival on campus, Michael has emanated an enthusiasm for EIU and a deep commitment to serving our student veterans and their families," Nadler said. "We are fortunate and thankful to welcome him to EIU."

One of Ruybal's most important responsibilities is to provide information regarding "the ever-changing world of benefits," including all federal and state benefits and scholarships to veterans, active duty military personnel and their families, and to advise and assist students on how to complete the necessary paperwork to activate and retain these benefits/scholarships.

"This is how I make my initial contact with these individuals," he said. "After that, every veteran is on my radar. I'm here for all of them."

He also serves as a liaison with other offices on EIU's campus in regards to services available to veterans and their families. These include, but may not be limited to, Academic Advising, Student Accounts, the Counseling Center, Disability Services, Housing, and Health Services.

And sometimes, Ruybal added, a student may just want a like-minded individual with whom to vent. That might be Ruybal himself or another student veteran introduced through his efforts.

"Some of our students will welcome opportunities to meet and mingle with fellow veterans," Ruybal said. "Others will decline, saying I left the military for a reason and now I'm here to go to school."

And either reaction is fine, he added.

For those who would like to foster relationships with fellow student veterans, there's always Student Veterans of Eastern, an organization formed so that "veterans, reservists, National Guardsmen and friends could have a common place to forge friendships and professional networking."

As a staff adviser to the group, Ruybal said he will be working closely with the student organization in efforts not only to bring student veterans together as a group, but to assist with their outreach efforts within the EIU and Charleston communities.

"The goal of my office is to be a one-stop shop for our student veterans," he said. "If I can't help with a particular problem, I'll find out who can."

"I just want them to know that I'm here for them. I'm not going anywhere."